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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

24 November 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Vietnam Air War and Chinese Bases

1. Since the US bombed Phuc Yen airfield in late October, North Vietnamese aircraft have on three different occasions landed at China's Ning-ming airfield after flying combat missions against US aircraft. In each case the aircraft returned directly to their home bases several hours later without attempting to engage in combat enroute. There have also been several instances when North Vietnamese fighters have flown across the border after combat missions but returned home without landing in China, possibly because of poor weather at Ning-ming or because of the departure of US aircraft posing a threat to the returning MIGs. We have no evidence that Chinese airfields have been used by the North Vietnamese to mount combat missions, and we are fairly confident that they have not been so used.

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25X1

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25X1

2. It appears, therefore, that because of present US attacks on their bases, North Vietnamese aircraft have begun to make limited operational use of Chinese airfields. But it is not established that a decision has been made by Hanoi and Peking to stage North Vietnamese combat operations from Chinese airfields on a systematic basis. What has already happened, however, does raise the question as to whether China is prepared to enlarge its involvement in the war in this manner.

3. It is conceivable that some major change in internal politics has precipitated a Chinese decision to become more involved in the Vietnam air war and to adopt a tougher, more aggressive stand against the US. Since early September there has been a respite in the political struggle, and Peking is therefore in a somewhat better position to deal with the new situation created by the US strikes against the North Vietnamese airfields. However, this hypothesis is purely speculative and there have been no private warnings from Peking, which we would expect if a major shift of policy were in train. There are no other indications suggesting such a development in Chinese policy. Propaganda attention to Vietnam remains comparatively moderate in volume and

- 2 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

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25X1

adheres to longstanding positions. Ground force activity in South China is normal, and even the buildup of air defenses, when viewed in the perspective of the past two years, does not seem particularly ominous.

4. Nevertheless, in going this far in providing a safe haven for North Vietnamese fighters, the Chinese must realize they have already assumed some new risks and they must be weighing carefully further use of their territory. On the one hand, Peking may believe that limited use of Chinese bases would not be especially risky. They may believe that US concern over drawing China more directly into the air war has been one of the reasons the US delayed so long in attacking North Vietnam's fighter bases. They might calculate that the US would be very reluctant to carry its air attacks across the Chinese border, and that any such decision would provoke strong opposition in the US and in the world at large. The Chinese may also reason that the risks of US retaliation could be minimized for some time by holding the use of Chinese airfields to a low level and by leaving China's role as ambiguous as possible.

- 3 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

5. On the other hand, China and North Vietnam must recognize that even in present circumstances there is a chance of hot pursuit by US aircraft. They must also consider the possibility that intensified use of Chinese bases would bring a retaliatory strike by the US. Particularly if the latter came to pass, the Chinese would have to decide whether to respond with new military countermeasures or back down and lose face.

6. We think it unlikely that Peking has yet determined just how extensively and in what circumstances Hanoi may use air bases in China. Moreover, it could be some time before the North Vietnamese are forced to abandon all use of their own fields, and it is by no means certain that Hanoi believes some fighter defense is so necessary that it would want to go further down the uncertain road of greater and greater Chinese involvement.

7. Thus the situation may continue unchanged for some time. However, if the present tactics of partial use of Chinese airfields do not elicit a strong US reaction or warning in private, taking the next step would over time tend to appear less drastic and risky. And then, if the North Vietnamese airfields could not

- 4 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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be used, Hanoi would be more disposed to ask for the right to mount combat operations from Chinese airfields. We believe there would be about an even chance that Peking would agree to this; if it did agree, Peking would attempt through propaganda, political action, and tight control of the operations to reduce the risks of a US response.

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FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

- 5 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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